



Idaho Fish and Game's



# Mule Deer Update

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## SOME FINER "POINTS" ON MULE DEER

Compared to a bison or elk, a mule deer has a relatively small and short digestive tract, making up about 10 % of its body weight. The larger and longer digestive tract of the bison or elk contributes up to 25% of their body weights.

What does this mean exactly? When it comes to eating, mule deer must be more selective and concentrate efforts on higher quality foods, such as a variety of leafy plants and young green grasses. Since food spends less time in the deer's digestive tract, there is less opportunity for the food to be digested and for nutrients to get absorbed. The larger and longer digestive systems of bison and elk allow them to eat much lower quality food and still get adequate nutrition.

The Mule Deer Initiative is working with private landowners and federal and state land managers to help increase both the quantity and quality of habitat in order to benefit mule deer. If you would like to volunteer on habitat enhancement projects, or if you would like to know what you can do to improve your own property for mule deer, contact your local Fish and Game office.

## CRP for Mule Deer Habitat

Mike Todd, Wildlife Habitat Biologist

Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Magic Valley Region

When one of the largest CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) cooperators in Cassia County also happens to be a wildlife enthusiast and an avid hunter, you have a formula for accomplishing good things for lots of wild species, including mule deer.

John Spratling of Burley is that avid hunter and wildlife enthusiast who wants to see his land sustain and produce wildlife. I first met John to discuss the wildlife habitat values of his property that were due to be re-enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). He wanted to know what he could do on those lands for several types of wildlife...mule deer, sage grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, and gray partridge. This initial meeting happened before the "Mule Deer Initiative" (MDI) was undertaken by the Department of Fish and Game.

Some of John's CRP lands lie on the southwest corner of North Chapin Mountain in game management unit 56. This unit, known as Sublette, and Black Pine, unit 57, are the two units in the Magic Valley Region identified as priority areas for MDI. Mule deer typically winter on and around North Chapin Mountain.

On a trip to this area in the winter of 2004 - 05, I personally counted over 300 mule deer on John's private CRP lands in this immediate vicinity. The location of John's property in mule deer winter range and his willingness to work with us to improve wildlife habitat on his lands provided the perfect opportunity

to implement habitat projects that would benefit a variety of wildlife, particularly mule deer.

This CRP acreage on the southwest face of North Chapin is predominantly crested wheatgrass that's been in the CRP program since 1987. In order to get more



valuable mule deer plants to grow in those stands, some management practices would have to be undertaken first.

Wildlife Habitat Biologist, Terry Gregory, and Wildlife Technician, Mike Remming, spent time on the ground to determine a course of action. Their plan included planting mule deer habitat on three dozen strips of varying length across 2,000 acres on the lower southwest face of North Chapin Mountain.

In the fall of 2005 we mowed the 100 foot wide strips to allow better application of *Round-Up*, a herbicide that would kill the existing vegetation. In the spring of 2006, we sprayed a 50 foot wide swath down the centerline of each strip with *Round-Up*.

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# MDI Coordinator's Report

*Toby Boudreau, MDI Coordinator, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Southeast Region*

Biologists usually squirm a little when put on the spot to look ahead and speculate what the future might bring. Our excuse is that it all goes back to our early academic training that said we are scientists not speculators, and we should deal with data, not hearsay. However, I think it is completely fair to estimate an outcome based on all the available information. So we can call it an estimate of the future or we can call it a forecast. Either way, we certainly can make some statements based upon our fawn survival data, the adult doe survival, and the deer survey results that we conducted last fall and earlier this spring.

Anyway, this is my best guess at what the mule deer hunting will be like for this coming fall. I think the overall number of deer observed by hunters will be normal or down slightly. The noticeable missing deer will be 2-point bucks, which in a few areas suffered significant losses based on fawn mortality from last winter. However, because of good survival during 2002-2005, it should still be a good year to pursue mule deer. Archers that have harvested mule deer this year have reported excellent body condition with plenty of fat.

One other issue affecting area deer hunters this fall is the impact of local wildfires on certain large sections of Idaho's landscape, some of which are popular hunting areas. Wildfire has some short-term negative effects but is a natural ecosystem process, and will help rejuvenate the deer habitat in some of those areas. The down side is that some hunters might have to find new places to pursue deer this fall. In reaction, Fish and Game is working closely with land management agencies and private landowners in the areas impacted by wildfire to help restore and improve habitats burned this summer for the benefit of all wildlife species.

Another item gaining momentum this fall is Fish and Game's statewide mule deer hunter survey that will be conducted to assess the current attitudes and opinions of deer hunters. This will be a random survey of hunters who purchased a deer tag in 2005. We will also make the survey available to anyone else interested in taking part in the survey. This survey will look at changes in deer hunters since the previous survey, attitudes about OHV (off highway vehicles), antlerless hunting, what makes a deer hunt, and what deer hunters want for the future. The last statewide survey of deer hunters was conducted in 1987. The results of the survey will be used to rewrite, where appropriate, the statewide mule deer management plan. The overriding goal of the survey and changing the management plan is to increase mule deer hunter satisfaction throughout Idaho.

## **CRP** *continued from page 1*

We did not spray the entire 100 foot width of each strip. Mr. Spratling notices deer in the crested wheat each winter; the mowing of the rest of each strip is an attempt to stimulate the grasses there and see if it makes any difference in deer usage.

This fall, probably sometime after mid-October, we will return to the site and drill a forb and shrub mix into the sprayed areas of each strip. The mix that will be used consists of small burnet, alfalfa, sanfoin, flax, milkvetch and crownvetch; all of those species are forbs, or broadleaf plants. In addition, there will be a small amount of fourwing saltbush and winterfat planted into some of these strips.

This land is non-irrigated and the success of this venture depends in large part on the amount and timing of winter precipitation we receive this year. However, the Department is committed long-term to making this project a success. The treatment techniques will give us some idea as to how to proceed next time with future MDI projects on crested wheatgrass CRP lands.

Ultimately what John Spratling and the Department both want is to see more deer on North Chapin Mountain in the winter, and increased over-winter survival, which hopefully will translate into a larger and healthier fawn crop that next spring.



# Consequences of Winterfeeding Food for Thought

*By Jennifer Jackson, Regional Conservation Educator, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Southeast Region.*

It is no surprise to anyone that winter snows drive big game to lower elevations. Tell-tale signs that such pushes have begun are evident in the form of increased roadkills, pillaged haystacks, and complaints of deer or elk snacking on backyard shrubbery. Often people will see big game standing in deep snow, many times in their backyards or in the middle of town, and assume that the animals are in need of food.

Does this mean it's time to start a feeding program? Not necessarily.

Carl Anderson, regional wildlife manager with the Southeast Region Fish and Game, says, "It seems obvious to many people that since we feed cattle and horses all winter, we should do the same for mule deer and elk. The key is the fact that deer and elk are wild animals, not domestic livestock, and there are important differences."

**Winter feeding of big game is often detrimental to wildlife. Here's how:**

- **Animals congregate at the artificial feeding sites, increasing the transmission of diseases.** When big game gather in large groups, the transmission of eye and respiratory ailments, brucellosis (in elk), and chronic wasting disease (in deer and elk) is enhanced. Brucellosis can cause fetuses to abort, and chronic wasting disease is a fatal brain illness.

Phil Mamer, veterinary medical officer for the Wildlife Health Lab in Caldwell, warns, "In Michigan, there are problems with tuberculosis spreading among white-tailed deer congregating at feeding sites. We don't have TB or chronic wasting disease yet in Idaho, but it could happen, and if it does, we don't want to have artificial feeding sites contributing to the problem."

- **There are costs to natural vegetation and private lands.** Think about when you sit down to a Thanksgiving spread-- you eat more than just the turkey and dressing-- you "graze" on the side dishes, too. Big game animals are no different. They may feast on the bounty at the feeding site, only to continue to browse nearby natural vegetation or private haystacks. Overused natural forage may not recover, and considering that elk can eat several tons of hay in one night, landowners can take a big hit from haystack damage. Furthermore, if there are cattle in the vicinity, the risk of brucellosis spreading from wildlife to livestock increases.

- **Concentrated animals attract predators.** Game sign and scent naturally cue predators to where game is located. Artificial feeding sites provide predators a specific area that has consistent, concentrated prey over time.

- **Feeding does not help keep wild animals wild.** Feed sites can prevent animals from finishing traditional migratory routes. Animals also become accustomed to the sites and begin looking for them year after year, even becoming more used to human interaction.



*Mule deer buck and two does "sharing" winter range with Georgetown Canyon residences on January 13, 2006. Georgetown Canyon has been a site of winter feeding in the past.*

**Under what circumstances will Fish and Game feed wildlife?**

Make no mistake, the people who work at Fish and Game care very much about the wildlife they are dedicated to preserving, protecting, and perpetuating for the citizens of Idaho. Fish and Game stresses that decisions to **not feed** wintering wildlife are done with the *best interest* of the animals in mind, as feeding wildlife can lead to a host of problems.

Mark Gamblin, regional supervisor for the Southeast Region Fish and Game, reminds the public, "This is not a winter feeding program; it is an *emergency* winter feeding program."

Each region of the state has a set of criteria that is used to help determine if an emergency situation for wintering wildlife exists. In addition, many regions have an active Winter Feeding Advisory Committee (WFAC), a citizen's group that advises Fish and Game personnel on winter feeding emergencies. When making feeding decisions, each Fish and Game office and the regional WFAC consider snow depths and crusting, temperatures, physical conditions of animals, and the conditions of winter range.

It may also be necessary to "bait" animals away from highways or railroads for the safety of people and the animals. "Baiting" is also used to draw animals away from haystacks on private property when other deterrents such as fencing and "hazing" do not work.

It often takes a combination of factors for an emergency situation to exist; and when one does, Fish and Game will step in to help.

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**Diminishing habitat is “feeding” the problem.**

With the passing of each year, more competition for dwindling winter ranges occurs between wildlife and humans, usually because of expanding human development or encroaching winter recreation activities. Considering the pitfalls of artificial feeding programs, winter feeding is not an adequate way to make-up for human actions resulting in the loss of natural habitats.

Rick Cheatum, president of the Southeast Idaho Mule Deer Foundation says, “The general public seems to think that they can ignore the big picture-- loss of habitat and too many people crowding into wildlife areas— as long as they can make an effort to artificially sustain wildlife populations.”



For more information about the Mule Deer Initiative,  
contact Toby Boudreau at (208) 232-4703  
or visit the Fish and Game website at

<http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/mdi/>.

For questions on this newsletter, please contact  
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